

Developing skills for operational frontline leaders in the GB rail industry

Anisha Tailor and Paul Leach

Rail Safety and Standards Board

ABSTRACT

In the GB rail industry, staff with operational line management responsibilities – termed ‘operational frontline leaders’ – have been identified as having an important role in safety performance through the development and management of frontline staff competence. However, there is a limited understanding of the skills they need to do this effectively and how these can be developed. To investigate this, this project undertook a workshop, literature review and qualitative interviews. It identified: the opportunities that operational frontline leaders have to develop and manage staff competence; the common knowledge and skills required across this group; the resources and strategies currently used in the rail industry to develop these, and the organisational, job/workplace and individual factors that can inhibit effective performance. It created a leadership model for operational frontline leaders in GB rail and developed ten recommendations for how companies can implement the model and support leaders to develop and apply the required skills.

KEYWORDS

Leadership, frontline, competence management, selection and assessment

Introduction

Research suggests that leaders and supervisors have a significant opportunity to shape the expected and accepted attitudes and behaviours of the workforce (Leach et al., 2011; Pennie et al., 2009). Evidence indicates that substandard leadership is linked to negative safety outcomes. Inquiries into numerous major disasters have found leadership failures were at least as important as human error and technical failure in causing the accidents. This includes: the Clapham Junction rail crash (Hidden, 1989), the Kings Cross fire (Fennell, 1988), the Chernobyl disaster (IAEA, 1986), and the Esso Longford gas plant explosion (Hopkins, 2000).

Conversely, studies indicate that effective leadership, and specifically effective frontline leadership, is associated with improved safety and performance (Liaw et al., 2010; Thompson et al., 1998), employee commitment and satisfaction (Shanafelt et al., 2015) and trust (Wang and Hsieh, 2013; Zacharatos et al., 2000).

In the GB rail industry, it is recognised that staff with operational line management responsibilities (termed ‘operational frontline leaders’ – OFLLs for this paper) can have a significant impact on frontline staff competence, performance and engagement. Indeed, in an industry strategy which seeks to reduce the occurrence of trains passing stop signals without authority (signals passed at danger), the role of managers of train drivers and signallers is identified as one of the five priority areas for improving performance (RSSB, 2017).

OFLL roles include not only driver managers and signalling managers but also those responsible for the frontline management of guards and conductors, station staff, control staff and infrastructure staff. Current resources (RSSB, 2008) to support OFLLs to develop their skillset to meet the

requirements of their role are perceived by the industry to be limited and outdated. Specifically, there is a lack of understanding of the skills and resources OFLLs require to effectively manage and develop the competence of frontline staff.

To help support the GB rail industry, this project sought to:

- Develop a model of the common skills and knowledge required by OFLLs in GB rail to develop and manage frontline staff competence.
- Identify current opportunities and challenges in developing these skills and knowledge.
- Recommend ways for GB rail organisations to implement the model to support OFLLs in effectively developing and managing frontline staff competence.

This paper discusses the method used to gather information, the findings from the research and how the findings have been incorporated into the creation of an OFLL leadership model and a ten point plan for implementing the model to develop and support OFLLs in the GB rail industry.

Method

Evidence was gathered via a workshop, 39 qualitative interviews with GB rail industry staff and a literature review.

A workshop was conducted with representatives from a GB rail industry co-ordination group for workforce safety and train operations. The researcher facilitated an initial exploration of the common managerial and leadership skills needed by OFLLs and their knowledge and skills gaps. The outputs were also used to develop and refine the interview topic guide.

Interviewees were recruited from GB train operating companies, freight operating companies, infrastructure maintenance and renewal companies and rail industry bodies with responsibility for rail staff competence. Interviews were carried out with OFLLs themselves and people who were responsible for managing OFLLs or their competence. The sample covered different OFLL roles and companies of different size and operation to ensure a range of responsibilities and organisational contexts were considered. The interviews focused on exploring the skills and knowledge that OFLLs need to manage and develop the competence of frontline staff, what challenges they face in doing this and how these challenges could be overcome. After the interviews had been completed, the two researchers conducting the interviews determined that data saturation had been reached.

A targeted literature search was conducted, covering operational frontline leadership, competence management and resources to support OFLLs to develop and manage frontline staff competence. This included research, articles and case studies. Literature was obtained and reviewed from: GB and international rail (including research reports, accident investigation reports and internal documents); other safety-critical industries (that is, oil and gas, energy, nuclear, healthcare and aviation), and non-safety organisations specialising in management, learning and development.

The findings were derived through a triangulation of these three methods to ensure a valid set of common knowledge and skills, issues and challenges and currently available resources.

Opportunities for OFLLs to develop and manage staff competence

The evidence suggests that OFLLs can have wide-ranging management responsibilities, including people (competence, welfare, attendance, performance and safety); budgets; work rotas; operational performance; quality; customer satisfaction; and change management. The evidence from the interviews suggests that there are four common opportunities for an OFLL to develop and manage staff competence.

- 1) Competence assessment – this focuses on all the activities relating to assessing staff competence in line with the relevant competence management system, making objective competence decisions and identifying strengths and areas for development.
- 2) Incident investigation and competence development plans (CDPs) – this focuses on all the activities the OFLL carries out to investigate an incident and to create, implement and close out a plan to enhance competence.
- 3) Training and briefings – briefings provide a formalised mechanism to develop competence through the communication and presentation of relevant information on a specific topic, issue or task(s). The OFLL may also be involved in specific training and development opportunities, such as mentoring, development days, classroom-based training (technical or non-technical) and on-the-job training.
- 4) Coaching and feedback – effective coaching and feedback can help staff improve their awareness of their performance and take ownership and responsibility for their development. The evidence suggests there are a number of formalised opportunities for coaching and feedback, such as planned one-to-one meetings, debriefs after assessments, post-incident discussions, and scheduled performance development review meetings. There are also informal opportunities that OFLLs can use to coach and provide feedback. For example, general conversations in the workplace or during day-to-day work can also be used to build relationships, communicate key messages and provide advice.

Common knowledge and skills required by OFLLs

The research found that there are common knowledge and skills that OFLLs require to successfully develop and manage the competence of their staff. These can be categorised into four areas.

- 1) Underpinning knowledge – this refers to the underpinning knowledge the OFLL requires to build credibility and respect with their staff, make objective decisions on competence and provide sound support, advice and feedback that can help staff develop and enhance their competence.
- 2) Functional skills – this refers to numeracy, literacy and the IT skills OFLLs require to undertake competence management activities and use the various systems required by their role.
- 3) Managerial skills – this refers to the skills required to undertake the organisational and administrative aspects of competence management. These allow the OFLL to create time to be visible to their team and spend sufficient time utilising the opportunities available to them to develop and manage competence.
- 4) Leadership skills – this refers to the people skills required to undertake successful competence management activity, that is activity that leads to improvements in competence and associated performance. The evidence suggests that these leadership skills can be further categorised into four areas: building relationships; communication; setting direction and expectations; and self-awareness.

Evidence from the interviews suggests that the most significant changes and expected future changes to the role of the OFLL in relation to developing and managing competence relate to the use of technology. In order for OFLLs to maintain credibility and continue to be seen as a technical expert, interviewees felt that OFLLs need to be aware of and proficient in new technologies that frontline staff will use.

A leadership model was created, categorising the competencies that OFLLs require to effectively manage and develop the competence of their frontline staff (Table 1).

Table 1: Model of skills and knowledge required by OFLLs in GB rail

Category	Sub-category	Competencies
Underpinning knowledge		Knowing what the frontline role entails in practice
		Knowing the job their staff do and the competence requirements of the role
		Knowing why the frontline job is done the way it is done
		Knowing the role they play in competence management and the impact they can have
		Knowing the company-specific procedures, processes and systems they need to follow
Functional skills		Adult numeracy
		Adult literacy
		General and role-specific IT skills
		Knowing how to operate technologies used in the operational frontline role
Managerial skills		Planning
		Prioritisation
		Resourcing
		Creating and keeping records
Leadership skills	Building relationships	Being approachable and friendly
		Being willing to build relationships
		Getting to know your staff
	Communication	Clarity and conciseness
		Adapting communication style
		Listening
		Empathy
		Assertiveness
		Sharing information
	Setting direction and expectations	Creating vision, goal and expectations for competence
		Focused on development and continuous improvement
		Demonstrating what good looks like
		Being consistent
		Decision-making
		Embracing and managing change
	Self-awareness	Knowing own strengths and weaknesses
		Motivated to develop own competence

To help companies to assess current and potential OFLLs' development needs, an operational frontline leadership checklist was produced. This lists each competency with a behavioural statement describing how an OFLL would demonstrate that skill or element of knowledge in the context of developing and managing frontline staff competence. An assessment rating scale is provided to help companies identify gaps in an individual's knowledge or skills.

Challenges and barriers to effective OFLL performance

The evidence from the interviews indicates that OFLLs face a number of challenges and barriers which can affect their ability to demonstrate the required skills and knowledge and thus effectively develop staff competence. These can be grouped using a human factors framework into organisational, job/workplace and individual factors.

- **Organisational** – a number of organisations were reported to operate a blame culture focused on compliance, rather than the fair culture which is needed to help OFLLs promote and facilitate continuous development. This can lead OFLLs to approach competence assessment as a ‘tick box exercise’ rather than an opportunity to develop. Several organisations were also reported to be focused on operational delivery. This meant that they were less willing to invest in staff competence development and that OFLLs focused more heavily on the immediate task of keeping services running, as opposed to thinking ahead and setting a vision for the team’s competence development. Additionally, a number of organisations were reported to disproportionately focus their recruitment and selection on the skills OFLLs required to manage service delivery rather than those required to foster a team culture of continuous development. Moreover, the OFLL role was found to be perceived as a thankless task, resulting in a shortage of suitable candidates. Also, training for OFLLs was found to be limited in that courses were often too generic and task-focused for OFLLs to understand and apply the skills to managing and developing competence specifically, in their own role. Furthermore, in many organisations, OFLLs reported having a poorly managed transition from the frontline role to the leadership role, with little support or structured competence management.
- **Job/workplace** – a number of organisations reported that the roles and responsibilities of OFLLs were not clearly formalised in the organisation and were not clearly communicated to leaders themselves and the wider business. This meant that many OFLLs took on more and more tasks outside of the scope of their role, struggled to prioritise, experienced high workload and were not sufficiently visible to their team. Workload issues were reported to be compounded by OFLLs having large teams spread over large geographical areas, making it difficult for these OFLLs to regularly see each team member. Additionally, in some organisations, procedures for supporting competence management activity were reported to be compliance-focused. This meant that CDPs could be perceived as a process to discipline and punish rather than a structured mechanism for competence improvement.
- **Individual** – evidence from the interviews suggested a number of common gaps in OFLLs’ knowledge and skills. OFLLs were reported to commonly lack sufficient knowledge of human factors, particularly how to integrate non-technical skills into their competence development activities, and how to identify and address the full range of factors that affect human performance in incident investigations. Additionally, time management was identified as a significant area of development, specifically how OFLLs can reduce firefighting and better utilise their opportunities to develop and manage competence. Finally, the evidence highlighted a number of examples where leadership skills could be improved: having difficult competence conversations and challenging under-performance; providing feedback, particularly on areas for improvement; communication, specifically concerning assertiveness; setting vision and direction; managing peers when promoted from within a team to be a line manager, and awareness of their own leadership style and strengths and weaknesses.

A guide was produced to help companies better understand and explore these challenges within their own organisations, structured into four topics derived from the research: defining the role of the OFLL; recruitment, selection and talent management; developing the competence of the OFLL,

and managing the workload of OFLLs. A description of each topic is provided, followed by self-reflective questions to help determine the relevance of the topic to the organisation.

Current support for OFLLs

The evidence identified a number of approaches that GB rail organisations take to develop the management and leadership skills of OFLLs.

- Behavioural frameworks – several organisations had introduced behavioural frameworks that described the leadership and management behaviours expected of managers throughout the business. These were reported to help create role clarity and inform the selection, training, development and performance management of OFLLs. However, the behaviours were noted to often be generic across operational and non-operational leaders, meaning that OFLLs could still find it difficult to relate and apply the behaviours to their specific activities.
- Selection and assessment – a number of organisations were found to have introduced behaviour-focused selection and assessment processes, to help determine whether individuals could demonstrate the attitudes and behaviours expected by the business, rather than technical knowledge and ability alone. This was found to include approaches such as psychometrics, personality measures, role play, and competence-based interviews.
- Streamlining the role – some organisations reported helping OFLLs to manage workload by splitting the competence management and line management elements into two roles. This was found to have advantages, such as reducing the number of tasks undertaken by an individual, and disadvantages, such as managers having an incomplete understanding of an individual's competence and the factors affecting their performance.
- On-the-job development – several organisations were found to offer on-the-job development to OFLLs, for example via mentorship and secondments. The evidence suggests that while these could help OFLLs develop their skills, access to a mentor could be disrupted by staff or location changes and there was the potential for poor practice to be passed down.
- Knowledge sharing to support development – some organisations reported providing mechanisms for OFLLs to learn from their colleagues and managers, such as away days and continuing professional development days. These provide dedicated time for OFLLs to share ideas about key challenges and issues, identify best practices and learn from each other, which can help to drive consistency.
- Training – the evidence indicates that there are a large number of internal and external training courses available to OFLLs, covering topics including generic leadership skills, railway management, human factors, and non-technical skills. Some interviewees noted that applying training in the workplace could be challenging, as they needed time to practice applying new methods and techniques learnt in the classroom. Furthermore, if more experienced OFLLs were not exhibiting model behaviours, this could lead to newly-trained OFLLs slipping back into customary ways of working.

A number of non-rail resources were also identified, which could support OFLL competence development. These included behavioural frameworks, training courses and qualifications, elearning tools, leadership toolkits, self-assessment questionnaires, and playing cards.

Evidence on the effectiveness of these resources and strategies was not available. The interviews suggested that resources and strategies to support OFLLs are not equally accessed or applied across the industry. A resource directory was produced to provide summary information on available resources to help develop OFLLs' competence, with the category they target in the leadership model (Table 1).

Conclusions and recommendations

In conclusion, it is recognised within the GB rail industry that a key element of the role of the OFLL is the competence development and management of frontline staff. This project identified that there are four key areas of opportunity for OFLLs to develop and manage competence: competence assessment; incident investigation and CDPs; training and briefings; and coaching and feedback. It developed a model of the common knowledge and skills that OFLLs require to successfully undertake competence development and management activities, which comprises underpinning knowledge, functional skills, managerial skills and leadership skills. This skillset allows OFLLs to build respect and credibility, create time to be visible to their team, promote continual development and use the systems required by their role. The project produced a leadership checklist to support companies in assessing OFLLs' competence and development needs.

There is a recognition within the GB rail industry that leadership and managerial skills are essential for OFLLs to perform their role. This is illustrated through the introduction of behavioural frameworks, changes to selection processes and the training and development opportunities made available to OFLLs. The resources and strategies currently used were synthesised into a directory to help the industry better explore and access them. Nevertheless, the research found that there are limited examples of leadership training that focuses specifically on how these skills can be applied by the OFLL to support competence development and management activity. The industry should therefore help OFLLs more effectively apply the common knowledge, managerial skills and leadership skills to competence development and management activities.

The research identified a number of barriers and challenges facing OFLLs, most notably: high workload caused by large team sizes and a large remit of tasks; a lack of clarity on their true role and purpose; leadership decisions and business processes that impede their ability to perform as an effective leader; and having insufficient time and organisational support to embed learning and new behaviours following formal training activities. The influence of these factors means that improving OFLL skills and knowledge alone is likely to have a limited effect on the performance of OFLLs. Therefore, organisations should also understand and tackle job, workplace and organisational issues that can have a negative impact on their OFLLs' performance, starting with the guide produced by this project.

1. Understand the opportunities that OFLLs have to manage and develop competence
2. Understand the knowledge and skills OFLLs need to manage and develop the competence of their staff
3. Embed knowledge and skills into your competence management systems for OFLLs
4. Integrate knowledge and skills into your selection, assessment and talent management processes
5. Provide training courses that align with best practice and support OFLLs in applying new learning in their workplace
6. Provide mechanisms to support OFLLs with continuous learning on the job
7. Address common gaps in OFLLs' knowledge and skills
8. Identify or create other job roles that can support the OFLL role, if appropriate
9. Understand and tackle job, workplace and organisational issues that can negatively impact OFLLs' performance
10. Consider how future changes in the industry will affect the OFLL role and the skills and knowledge they need

Figure 1: Recommendations for GB rail industry to improve the skillset and performance of OFLLs

A limitation of this research is that evidence was not available on the effectiveness of the various resources used to support OFLL competence development. However, interviewees were able to provide qualitative insights into their perceived usefulness. Also, freight operating companies were underrepresented in the interviews with OFLLs; nevertheless, ample evidence was obtained for this sector from those responsible for managing OFLLs or their competence.

The research findings resulted in ten recommendations for GB rail organisations (Figure 1). It is recommended that these are undertaken as concurrent, ongoing activities, rather than finite steps to be completed in sequence. Addressing all of the opportunities and challenges to OFLL performance – as opposed to focusing on one factor alone – is likely to result in more significant improvements in the skillset of and support for OFLLs, both of which are needed to shape the expected attitudes and behaviours of frontline staff.

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